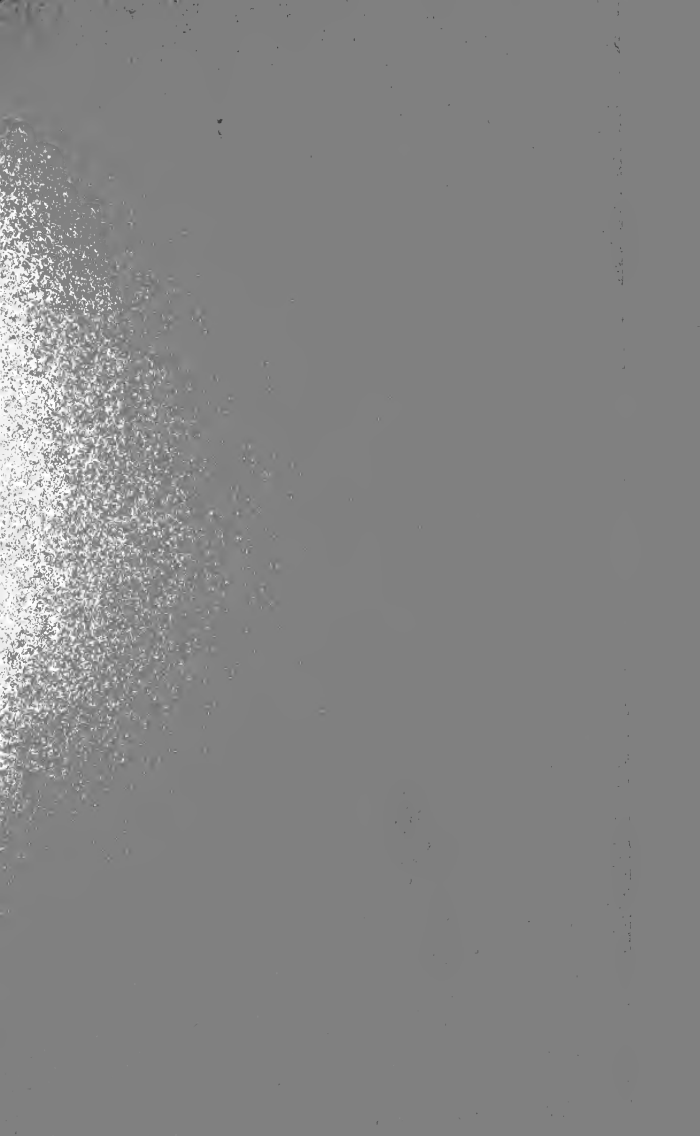


Smith, Alexander
Sonnets on the war

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SONNETS ON THE WAR.

BY

ALEXANDER SMITH,

AND BY

THE AUTHOR OF "BALDER," AND
"THE ROMAN."

See my list of books

LONDON :

DAVID BOGUE, FLEET STREET.

PRICE ONE SHILLING.



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Sydney Dobell

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DEDICATORY.

I.

“ OH, Treeless Grange, upon the windy Hill,
Crowded with peats and comfortable stacks !
The brightest lot and fairest landscape lacks,
Unless these gentle friends are with me still ;”
I murmured, as I trudged with right good will.
Before the autumn’s mellow breath there rolled
A heavy vale of tanned and lazy gold :
The dog was barking from the shadowy mill.
Their sunset-lighted window filled my eye ;
Tears glittered on my cheek. “ Where’er they roam,—
’Neath sparrow-haunted thatch or stately dome,
May God in all his plenty round them lie !”
I raised my face. Across the orange sky
A weary train of rooks were flying home.

DEDICATORY.

II.

And if we sing—I and that dearer friend—
Take Thou our music. He dwells in thy light
Through sun and shower, blue day and starry night.
And sometimes for a moment thou dost blend
Thy moonrise with my twilight. Away I wend,
Like one from prayer. A life-long hood of pain
Thou wear'st, and never will a murmur stain
Thy spirit's crystalline until the end.
I pass into the world from thy abode;
A something of thy radiance pure and tried,
Hangs round my soul for days. I would to God
We could thy burden in two parts divide,
Thy heart were blythe as dawn, and side by side
We three should travel on life's sacred road !

SONNETS ON THE WAR.



SONNETS ON THE WAR.

PREFATORY.

I SAW the human millions as the sand
Unruffled on the starlit wilderness.
The day was near, and every star grew less
In universal dawn. Then woke a band
Of wheeling winds, and made a mighty stress
Of morning weather; and still wilder went
O'er shifting plains, till, in their last excess,
A whirlwind whirled across the whirling land.
Heaven blackened over it; a voice of woes
Foreran it; the great noise of clanging foes
Hurtled behind; beneath the earth was rent,
And howling Death, like an uncaverned beast,
Leaped from his lair. Meanwhile morn oped the East,
And thro' the dusty tumult God arose.

FIRE-LIGHT.

Eve darkens on our legendary scenes ;
Pale Flora watching o'er the Prince forlorn,
Ruth standing like a poppy in the corn,
And Mary, fairest, saddest of the queens,
Bending in tumbled and dishevelled grief
Above melodious Rizzio, stabbed and torn.
Frail Lucy shrinking 'neath her lover's scorn,
With heart as worthless as a withered leaf,
Which o'er the waste by every wind is whirled.
Even as we talk, over a stage of gloom,
A curtain rises ; calm and pale with hate,
Two foes are closing in the tug of doom.
On Fancy's stage 'twas but a mimic state,
But on that other stands or falls the World.

THE CRYSTAL PALACE. †

A mighty hand o'er all the world did pass,
It stripped old empires and sun-sluggard isles,
The icy Arctic, Egypt's thirsty miles,
And laid its treasures in a hall of glass.
Upon the plain, innumerable as grass,
The nations murmured; and we fondly thought
That full-grown Time unto the world had brought
Eternal sunshine and eternal smiles.
Blind! blind! Resolve the lovely summer air,
'Tis one wild combat. Why did no one teach
That that fallacious future, smiling fair,
Hid watchfires burning on a hostile beach,—
A battle's fluctuating gloom and glare,
Death waiting silent in the gaping breach?

MURMURS.

“ With martial clangor thro’ thrilled street and square
Our Grenadiers marched proudly to the war.
What then ? On lazy purples lolls the Czar !
Fame, grown familiar as our native air,
Claps her loud wings, prepares to fly afar—
Another helm the glorious bird shall wear.”
To this replies a second, dismal-souled :
“ Nerveless our leaders, as the libertine wind
Sated with roses. Where is Nelson’s peer ?
England lies dead and confined in her gold.”
Draw the wide curtains ! Strike these owlets blind
With Battle’s splendour ! Take away their breath
With torn lines pressing up the hill of Death,
And Victory buried in an English cheer.

ALMA. x x

The Chasseurs spread like flame from crag to crag,
The lowering English silence was unbroke;
“Forward” strung all our columns, and a shock
Of valour tingled to the dancing flag.
A wild cheer drowned the cannon. Blind with smoke,
Stumbling o’er rocks, shattered with shell and shot,
We staggered on. Our banner,—glorious rag,—
Is dashed to earth,—from dying hands ’tis caught,
Again ’tis foremost in the stern advance.
Hurrah! We see the faces of our foes!
A blinding gush of flame, a rank goes down,
A stifling vapour hides the bloody close.
Up springs the breeze; and lo! on Alma’s crown
Stand sternly-lowering England and flushed France.

THE ARMY SURGEON.

Over that breathing waste of friends and foes,
The wounded and the dying, hour by hour,—
In will a thousand, yet but one in power,—
He labours thro' the red and groaning day.
The fearful moorland where the myriads lay
Moved as a moving field of mangled worms.
And as a raw brood, orphaned in the storms,
Thrust up their heads if the wind bend a spray
Above them, but when the bare branch performs
No sweet parental office, sink away
With hopeless chirp of woe, so as he goes
Around his feet in clamorous agony
They rise and fall; and all the seething plain
Bubbles a cauldron vast of many-coloured pain.

THE WOUNDED.

“Thou canst not wish to live,” the surgeon said.
He clutched him, as a soul thrust forth from bliss
Clings to the ledge of Heaven! “Would’st thou
 keep this
Poor branchless trunk?” “But she would lean
 my head
Upon her breast; oh, let me live!” “Be wise.”
“I could be very happy; both these eyes
Are left me; I should see her; she would kiss
My forehead; only let me live.”—He dies
Even in the passionate prayer. “Good Doctor, say
If thou canst give more than another day
Of life?” “I think there may be hope.” “Pass on.
I will not buy it with some widow’s son!”
“Help,” “help,” “help,” “help!” “God curse
 thee!” “Doctor, stay,
Yon Frenchman went down earlier in the day.”

THE WOUNDED.

“ See to my brother, Doctor ; I have lain
All day against his heart ; it is warm there ;
This stiffness is a trance ; he lives ! I swear,—
I swear he lives ! ” “ Good Doctor, tell my ain
Auld Mother ; ”—but his pale lips moved in vain.
“ Doctor, when you were little Master John,
I left the old place ; you will see it again.
Tell my poor Father,—turn down the wood-lane
Beyond the home-field—cross the stepping-stone
To the white cottage, with the garden-gate—
O God ! ”—He died. “ Doctor, when I am gone
Send this to England. ” “ Doctor, look upon
A countryman ! ” “ Devant mon Chef ? Ma foi ! ”
“ Oui, il est blessé beaucoup plus que moi. ”

AFTER ALMA.

God be with ev'ry man who fell or fought !
Let that stern Marshal ever honoured be,
Who asked the price of dazzling victory —
Life ! And he threw his down. There slumbers not
'Mong our brave dead a braver man than he.
The proudest tears into my eyes are brought
By the plumed soldiers of my native land.
Sons are they of that worn and wasted band,
Who stood around their king the while the night
Darkened on Flodden. Oh ! with hearts as light
As if these wild heights were a summer feat,
They marched to death. Their ruined ranks were
true
As crumbling squares at deadly Waterloo,
On which vain hurricanes of battle beat.

SELF.

The War rolls on. Dark failure, brave success
Deafen our ears. But little power to touch
Our deeper human nature lies in such.
Doth victory make an infant's smile the less?
Each man hath his own personal happiness,
In which—as creep the cold-enfeebled flies
In the late beam—he warm and basking lies.
Each hath his separate rack of sore distress.
No hand can give an alms, no power consoles;
We only have our true hearts and our souls.
In leaguered forts, water with patient arts,
They draw from their own court or garden-plot;
So from the deep-sunk wells within our hearts
We draw refreshment when the fight is hot.

VOX POPULI. +

What if the Turk be foul or fair? Is't known
That the sublime Samaritan of old
Withheld his hand till the bruised wretch had told
His creed? Your neighbour's roof is but a shed,
Yet if he burns shall not the flame enfold
Your palace? Saving his, you save your own.
Oh ye who fall that Liberty may stand,
The light of coming ages shines before
Upon your graves! Oh ye immortal band,
Whether ye wrestled with this Satan o'er
A dead dog, or the very living head
Of Freedom, every precious drop ye bled
Is holy. 'Tis not for his broken door
That the stern goodman shoots the burglar dead.

MEDITATIVE.

We could not turn from that colossal foe,
The morning shadow of whose hideous head
Darkened the furthest West, and who did throw
His evening shade on Ind. The polar bow
Behind him flamed and paled, and through the red
Uncertain dark his vasty shape did grow
Upon the sleepless nations. Lay him low !
Aye, low as for our priceless English dead
We lie and groan to-day in England ! Oh,
My God ! I think Thou hast not finished
This Thy fair world ! Where, triumph Ill or Good,
We still must weep ; where or to lose or gain
Is woe ; where Pain is medicined by Pain,
And Blood can only be washed out by Blood.

THE CAVALRY CHARGE.

Traveller on foreign ground, whoe'er thou art,
Tell the great tidings ! They went down that day
A Legion, and came back from victory
Two hundred men and Glory ! On the mart
Is this "*to lose ?*" Yet, Stranger, thou shalt say
These were our common Britons. 'Tis our way
In England. Aye, ye heavens ! I saw them part
The Death-Sea as an English dog leaps o'er
The rocks into the ocean. He goes in
Thick as a lion, and he comes out thin
As a starved wolf ; but lo ! he brings to shore
A life above his own, which when his heart
Bursts with that final effort, from the stones
Springs up and builds a temple o'er his bones.

*of precious life
Robert*

THE CAVALRY CHARGE. X

We mourn them with remorseful tenderness,
And yet, methinks, our tears should be denied
By a proud effort. When they so have died,
What is a little breathing more or less?
“Woe’s me! each bosom was a Russian targe.”
“Who would not pay that priceless price to feel
The trampling thunder and the blaze of steel—
The terror and the splendour of the charge?”
“In vain that human thunderbolt was flung—
In vain ’twas shivered.” “At the word they sprung
In one wild light of sword and gleaming corse,
And at the terrible beauty of their look
Death stood dismayed. Jove! how the cowards shook
When on them burst that hurricane of horse!”

HOME.



She turned the fair page with her fairer hand—
More fair and frail than it was wont to be—
O'er each remembered thing he loved to see
She lingered, and as with a fairy's wand
Enchanted it to order. Oft she fanned
New motes into the sun; and as a bee
Sings thro' a brake of bells, so murmured she,
And so her patient love did understand
The reliquary room. Upon the sill
She fed his favourite bird. "Ah, Robin, sing!
He loves thee." Then she touches a sweet string
Of soft recall, and towards the Eastern hill
Smiles all her soul—for him who cannot hear
The raven croaking at his carrion ear.

MISS NIGHTINGALE. X

How must the soldier's tearful heart expand,
Who from a long and obscure dream of pain,—
His foeman's frown imprinted in his brain,—
Wakes to thy healing face and dewy hand !
When this great noise hath rolled from off the land,
When all those fallen Englishmen of ours
Have bloomed and faded in Crimean flowers,
Thy perfect charity unsoiled shall stand.
Some pitying student of a nobler age,
Lingering o'er this year's half-forgotten page,
Shall see its beauty smiling ever there ;
Surprised to tears his beating heart he stills,
Like one who finds among Athenian hills
A Temple like a lily white and fair.

WARNING.

Virtue is Virtue, writ in ink or blood.
And Duty, Honour, Valour, are the same
Whether they cheer the thundering steps of Fame
Up echoing hills of Alma, or, more blest,
Walk with her in that band where she is least
Thro' smiling plains and cities doing good.
Yet, oh to sing them in their happier day!
Yon glebe is not the hind whose manhood mends
Its rudeness, yet it gains but while he spends,
And mulcts him rude. Even that sinless Lord
Whose feet wan Mary washed, went not His way
Uncoloured by the Galilean field;
And Honour, Duty, Valour, seldom wield
With stainless hand the immedicable sword.

WORTHIES.

When England calls, he is her worthiest son
Who leaves his home buried in rooky trees,
And lands that touch the sunset; on his knees
Begs that he may her perilous errands run.
In trembling days the worth of such an one!
And England wears a quiver full of these;
Men who can sternly die when hope is done,
Captives of winter in the Polar seas:
Who, undegraded by a thought of shame,
Stand at their posts while ruined hull and shroud
Scare the waste ocean with a mass of flame;
Where cheering ranks in silent swathes are mowed,
Who fall, and fall with spirits high and proud,
For o'er their bodies England steps to fame.

SEBASTOPOL.



Blaze gun to gun along the roaring steep!

Ram home—ram home! Knee-deep in living mire,

Run like cold Demons thro' the Hell of fire,

And feed the gulphs of flame! We have burned Sleep

And Night! The useless Sun is in the Deep!

Fire on! This hour shall en' them, son and sire!

Fire on! The scorching City is a heap!

The bastions reel, the toppling turrets leap!

Advance! The assault like to a sudden sea

Bursts in the thunder of one long wild wave.

Advance! The boiling waters rage and rave,

And the white foam flouts Heaven. High, higher!

See

The drowning streets! High, higher! Who can

save?

The flood—the flood! A Deluge and a Grave.

REST.

A victory ! Illumined towns rejoice !
Pale, pale our cheeks when deadly tidings come !
Is this eternal,—cannon, trump, and drum ?
Thank God this troubled century of noise
Shall grow as the untrodden desert dumb.
This England's fame of which we sing and rave,
Shall seem, years hence, unto the eyes of some,
Like the effaced inscription on a grave.
Our many-noised metropolis shall pass,
And Silence shall grow over it like grass ;
And in the tender twilights of the year
Its site shall be the haunt of summer birds ;
Tradition wandering there shall murmur words
That take no shape of meaning to the ear.

AMERICA. 


Men say, Columbia, we shall hear thy guns.
But in what tongue shall be thy battle-cry ?
Not that our sires did love in years gone by,
When all the Pilgrim fathers were little sons
In merrie homes of Englaunde ! Back, and see
Thy satchelled ancestor ! Behold, he runs
To mine, and, clasped, they tread the equal lea
To the same village-school, where side by side
They spell "our Father." Hard by, the twin-pride
Of that grey hall whose ancient oriel gleams
Thro' yon baronial pines, with looks of light
Our sister-mothers sit beneath one tree.
Meanwhile our Shakspeare wanders past and dreams
His Helena and Hermia. Shall we fight ?

AMERICA.

Nor force nor fraud shall sunder us! Oh ye
Who north or south, on east or western land,
Native to noble sounds, say truth for truth,
Freedom for freedom, love for love, and God
For God; Oh ye who in eternal youth
Speak with a living and creative blood
This universal English, and do stand
Its breathing book; live worthy of that grand
Heroic utterance — parted, yet a whole,
Far yet unsevered,—children brave and free
Of the great Mother-tongue, and ye shall be
Lords of an empire wide as Shakspeare's soul,
Sublime as Milton's immemorial theme,
And rich as Chaucer's speech, and fair as Spencer's
dream.

FREEDOM. X

Freedom was driven forth by tawny Cain;
Since then the outcast hath not laid her head
In royal palace or in labourer's shed,
But wrapt-up in her sorrow and her pain,
Afar she wanders roofless as the rain,
Homeless as wind. She sighed on English downs;
We see her footsteps on the Scottish waste
In martyrs' graves. Weary, she crossed the wave,
And heard with trembling limbs and heart in haste,
The blood-hounds baying from her secret cave.
She wept in the red light of burning towns,
O'er murdered Poland, and now, wild as Fear,
And trembling with rare hope, she leans to hear
If Hungry stirs within her bloody grave.



A STATESMAN.

Captain be he, my England, who doth know
Not careful coasts, with inland welcomes warm ;
But who, with heart infallible, can go
Straight to the gulfstreams of the World, where blow
The inevitable Winds. Let cockles swarm
The sounded shores. He helms Thee, England ! who,
Faced by the very Spirit of the Storm,
Full at the phantom drives his dauntless prow !
And tho' the Vision rend in racks of blood,
And drip in thunder from his reeling spars,
The compass in his hand, beholds the flood
Beneath, o'er-head the everlasting stars
Dim thro' the gory ghost ; and calm in these,
Thro' that tremendous dream sails on to happier seas.

POLAND. ITALY. HUNGARY.

In the great Darkness of the Passion, graves
Were oped, and many Saints which slept arose.
So in this latter Darkness, which doth close
Upon our noon. That Peace Divine which saves
And blesses, and from the celestial waves
Of whose now-parted garment our worst woes
Did touch a healing virtue, by our foes
Is crucified. The inextricable slaves
Have slain what should have set them free. Behold,
The vail is rent; Earth yawns; the rocks are hurled
In twain; and Kingdoms long since low and cold,
Each with his dead forgotten brow enfurled
In that proud flag he fell upon of old,
Come forth into the City of the World.

JERUSALEM.

If God so raise the Dead, shall He pass by
The Captive and the immemorable chain?
Judæa capta!—taken but not slain—
And cursed not to die—ah, not to die?
Then come out of thine ages, thou art free!
Live but one Greek in old Thermopylæ,
And Greece is saved! Dark stands the Northern Fa
At Europe's open door; upon her nod
To pass that breach a hundred nations wait.
What! shall we meet her with the bayonet?
As the West sets the Sun 'twixt sea and sky
In that Great Gate, Immortal! let us set
Thy doom; quit Destiny with Destiny,
Meet Fate by Fate, and fill the gap with God.

AUSTRIAN ALLIANCE. 

Doth this hand live? Trust not a royal coat,
My country! Smite that cheek; there is no stain
But of the clay! no flush of shame or pain.
This is the smell o' the grave. Lift the gold crown
And see that brow. Lo! how the dew drops down
The empty house! The worm is on the walls,
And the half-shuttered lights are dull and dead
With dusty desecration. The soul fled
On a spring-day within thy palace-halls,
Hapsburg! and all the days of all the springs
Of all the ages bring it not again!
Vampyre! we wrench thee from the breathing throat
Of living Man, and he leaps up and flings
Thy rotten carcase at the heads of Kings.

WAR.

X

The husband from whose arms you could not part,
Sleeps among hundreds in a bloody pit ;
The boy you nursed with fondness infinite
Lies on the hill, a bullet through his heart.
Bewildered Bride ! mute Mother ! creep apart,
And weep yourselves away as it is fit.
England hath sterner work to do than grieve.
When our best blood hath drenched that distant earth,
What man soe'er in this embattled land
Shall raise a hushing arm, and murmur, " Cease,"
A curse be on him ! We conquer, or we leave
A vacant chair at ev'ry English hearth.
The far-off lily of a worthy peace
Can be plucked only by War's bloody hand.

NAPOLEON I.

He prophesied this day. His silent face
With its great calm the wildest mob could still.
With its unearthly beauty he did fill
France, till she thought it pride and highest grace
To die wherever he should point the place.
His armies broke on the disturbed Alps
A thousand years of silence. 'Neath their scalps
He smote that brittle Austria at his will.
The careless heavens left him to expire
Unwatched, untended, as a beggar's fire.
When some great poet of a nobler stock
To nobler ears his story will rehearse,
Prometheus, hanging patient on the rock,
Shall be forgotten for that grander verse.

NAPOLEON III.

If goodness sits beneath a constant heaven,
Like Italy 'neath the sun ; if gilded wrong
Is inly smitten, while the applauding throng
Cry out, " A god ! a god !" till noon is riven ;
When to itself his conscious heart is shriven,
Is his peace ample ? or his penance strong ?
A sorry sight if to the day were given
The secrets of that heart locked up so long !
The plainest man that you may chance to meet,
If death hath touched him, makes you stare with awe.
Two sudden visions in the night I saw,
A Monarch honoured on his golden seat,—
A Tyrant strangled in the shreds of law,
Dragged like a dead dog through the yelling street.

CHEER.

A weak and tottering man our foes could see,—
A child might trip him, but his simple name
Fenced us like armies : 'neath a load of fame
He rests from his long labour. Victory
Was his familiar, and where'er he went
She waited like a menial in his tent.
He sleeps with Nelson. Tho' fond England grieves,
Fame, as of old, builds 'neath her happy eaves.
Why should we fear? That fortress dark with ire,
Like a coiled scorpion in a ring of fire,
Shall fall. Before us to the unseen close
The future stretches without bound or mark,
And England fearless sails across the dark,
Leaving a trail of splendour as she goes.

VOLUNTEERS. X

Take us, O England! in thine hour of need.
We hold our lives out in our eager hands!
Take us, O England! gather us in bands!
We come to rot in winds or wildly bleed,
We come in crowds from glen and milky mead,
From Homes, fir-saddened on the sunset wold,
From Fortune's pathways, littered thick with gold.
From tarry towns that on the ocean feed,
From lowing fields, from blythe cock-crowing farms.
From proud brides nestling in our happy arms,
At thy command we dare the chilly grave,
And dying, we have one wild thought above
The pang. This guerdon, England, we would crave—
Take us into the heaven of thy love.

CHILDLESS.

The Son thou sentest forth is now a Thought—
A Dream. To all but thee he is as nought
As if he had gone back into the same
Bosom that bare him. Oh, thou grey pale Dame,
With eyes so wan and wide, what! knowest thou where
Thy Dream is such a thing as doth up-bear
The earth out of its wormy place? I' the air
Dost see the very fashion of the stone
That hath his face for clay? Deep, deep, hast found
The texture of that single weight of ground
Which to each mole and mark that thou hast known
Is special burden? Nay, her face is mild
And sweet. In Heaven the evening star is fair,
And there the mother looketh for her child.

THE COMMON GRAVE.

Last night beneath the foreign stars I stood
And saw the thoughts of those at home go by
To the great grave upon the hill of blood.
Upon the darkness they went visibly,
Each in the vesture of its own distress.
Among them there came One, frail as a sigh,
And like a creature of the wilderness
Dug with her bleeding hands. She neither cried
Nor wept; nor did she see the many stark
And dead that lay unburied at her side.
All night she toiled, and at that time of dawn
When Day and Night do change their More and Less,
And Day is More, I saw the melting Dark
Stir to the last, and knew she laboured on.

OUR MOTHER.

Christmas will come. Is England gay and glad?
Weary she turns from the untasted feast,
And listens at the window of the East
To catch the far-off tidings, proud or sad.
Many a weary vigil she has had.
Look on her face! Her thoughts have gone away
To that far time, when she did dance and play
In sunny forests in a wolf-skin clad.
And now she dreams of unforgotten sons,
Her eldest Alfred—and a slow tear runs
Down her worn cheek; a wind of memory stirs
The long grass in the churchyard of her heart.
She listens at the East! Whoe'er thou art,
Thank God if thou art called a son of hers.

FINAL. X

The groan of armies fallen ; a hot glare
Of Cities ; Battle-cries of Right and Wrong ;
The tramp of charging hosts ; the thunderous gale
Of Navies rocked in War ; o'er all a wail,
Wild, wan, ululant, long-prolonged along
The moaning caverns of the plaining air,
The cry of conscious Fate. The firmament
Waves from above me like a tattered flag ;
And as a soldier in his lowly tent
Looks up when a shot strikes the helpless rag
From o'er him, and beholds the canopy
Of Heaven, so, sudden to my startled eye,
The Heavens that shall be ! The dream fades. I stand
Among the mourners of a mourning land.

GOOD NIGHT.



GOOD NIGHT.

The stars we saw arise are high above,
And yet our Evensong seems sung too soon.
Good Night! I lay my hand—with such a love
As thou wert brother of my blood—upon
Thy shoulder, and methinks beneath the moon
Those sisters, Anglia and Caledon,
Lean towards each other. Aye, for Man is one;
We are a host ruled by one trumpet-call,
Where each, armed in his sort, makes as he may
The general motion. The well-tuned array
We see; yet to what victory in what wars
We see not; but like the revolving stars
Move on ourselves. The total march of all
Or men or stars God knows. Lord, lead us on!

1041



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